

**THE CONCEPT OF TRANSFORMATION IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S
*JASMINE VIS-A-VIS BHAGAVAD GITA***

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ABSTRACT

Bharati Mukherjee, an extremely vehement voice amongst the women novelists of diaspora, creates a text by fusing her narrative with canonical works such as the *Ramayana*, the *Bhagvad Gita* and other sources of Hindu mythology. A significant example of textual reincarnation is that of Hindu goddess Sita. The storyline of the novel *Jasmine* is as “twisted” as the identities of the protagonists in the novel, i.e. Jasmine, which complicates any attempt to categorize the characters of the novel or the plot into cultural archetypes. The novel *Jasmine* is blended with narrative elements from canonical works and Hindu mythology. Hindu texts, namely for their focus on reincarnation and pluralistic deities, are the clearest Indian cultural influence on these rebirths. Jasmine, like the Bengali interpretation of ‘Kali’, the Goddess of Strength, encompasses birth and destruction at the same time. She undergoes transformations in the form of new identities like Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase and Jane. She reflects an image of the Indian woman who not only shows her strong spirit and courage not only in India but also in the ‘New World’. Her journey also reads as a realization of Hindu theological beliefs about the soul and the emancipatory narrative of self and identity embedded within the Hindu culture. This paper studies the characters of Jasmine who changes her names and with every new name she transforms herself into a new self and in the process she represents different transformations of herself, much like Hindu deities depicted in the *Bhagvad Gita*.

Key Words: Transformation, incarnation, self, identity.

Indo-English novelists, whether in India or in the Diaspora, have shown their genius in dealing with divergent themes, reflecting upon contemporary social, cultural and familiar realities in their unique inimitable narrative style and in delineating characters with startling sensibilities. In the 1973 edition in his *Indian Writing in English*, Professor K.R. Srinivasa Iyenger wrote: “The future of Indian fiction, and of Indo-Anglican fiction, is indeed full of promise. Recent fiction has given ample evidence of vitality, variety, humanity and artistic integrity.” (qtd. in Bangal 191) Indian fiction in English has touched new heights of glory and recognition in the hands of Bharati Mukherjee. As a writer of Indian Diaspora she has lent new dimension and universal appeal to Indian fiction in English literature. She dealt with diversified themes in her novels and short stories. Being an Indian and deeply interested in Indian culture and values Bharati Mukherjee portrays her Indian protagonists in Indian shades and backgrounds. Her characters reflect Mukherjee’s awareness about Indian literature, culture, myths, customs & rituals, traditions, beliefs, ethics, scriptures, and everything that is Indian.

Reinvention, incarnation and entanglement of time and place are prominent in Mukherjee's works, especially in her novel *Jasmine*, both in its plot and characters as well as the works she chooses to interweave thematically in her own text. Mukherjee creates a unique text by fusing her narratives with canonical works such as the Ramayana, the Bhagvadgita and other sources of Hindu mythology. The protagonist of the novel *Jasmine* (1989) is a significant example of textual reincarnation.

The novel *Jasmine* is a superlative work of fiction by Bharati Mukherjee portraying a memorable character in Jasmine who shows an extremely strong sense of life and quest for identity. Jyoti, a village girl from Punjab, faces disasters at various stages of her life and struggles restlessly to find an identity and to make a place for herself to give a shape and meaning to her life: “Her struggle symbolizes the restless quest of a rootless person piqued by a depressing sense of isolation all around.”(Mukherjee 3)

Jyoti hails from a family and society where women lead a life of female foeticide, suppression, torture, male chauvinism and neglect without having any say even for the course of their own life. A society where women liberty is a pipe dream, and as far as the fulfillment of their wish regarding learning higher education is concerned the least talked the better. But, Jyoti, at a very early age, is not ready to be governed and directed by the norms of society which tried to condition her existence. She doesn’t want to be an ordinary girl to lead a meaningless life without individuality. When the astrologer tells her that she would be a widow and an exile she reacts strongly, saying, “You are a crazy old man. You don’t know what my future holds!” (Mukherjee 3) She asserts that she is not just nothing. Here begins her never ending journey of transforming herself and leading a life of freewill. Her transformations are very much like the incarnations into new women more determined and confident than the earlier facing and fighting the hardships of the society.

Renamed as Jasmine by Prakash after marriage, Jyoti shares the dream of her husband of having a life with bright prospects in the States and “to be a part of it.” But unfortunately, on the eve of their departure to the States Prakash becomes a victim of a bomb attack only to find her dreams shattered to pieces. Prakash never wanted Jasmine to live a life without an identity and always motivated her to participate in his work. So, instead of accepting a miserable and doomed life of a cursed widow She decides to go to America and fulfil her husband’s wish.

Jasmine illegally enters America to “. . . fulfil Prakash’s mission and perform ‘sati’ on the ground of the university where he gained admission to study. But once landed in America,

her old-self strongly conditioned by the society into which she is born, gives birth to anew, exuberant self that denies death and welcomes the prospect of a different life.” (Indira 87) Jasmine finds herself in a state of helplessness and vulnerability in an alien land and she soon comes to grips with cruel reality after her rape by Half-Face, a West Caribbean. Being outraged, she thinks of committing suicide but the thought of fulfilling her dream makes her murder the man who becomes the hindrance in her way to do so. She leaves her Indian identity of Jyoti and Jasmine at this point.

After the disastrous and violent incident a broken and tired Jasmine is saved by Lillian Gordon, a kind Quaker lady, who is committed to save the illegal immigrants in America. She affectionately calls her Jazzy and teaches her to live in America, to dress and walk like an American. She tells her “Let the past make you wary, by all means. But do not let it deform you.”(Mukherjee 131) Here again she is reborn. Having an introductory letter to Lillian’s daughter, Jasmine comes to New York. Here she meets Devinder Vadhera, the teacher of her husband, who was instrumental in Prakash’s admission. She somehow passes five painful and suffocating months, as she feels like a captured creature having nothing to do according to her will. Jasmine finds it difficult to cope with the conservative and confined life in the house of Vadheras and leaves them for another adventure.

After leaving the house of the Vadheras Jasmine gets a job of caregiver to the adopted daughter of Taylor and Wylie Hayes. Her stay with Taylor and Wylie in an apartment on Claremont Avenue, Manhattan, looking after their daughter Duff, seems enjoyable. Taylor gives her a new name “Jase”. She decides to stay here forever because of the love and affection she gets. But the fate has some other plans for her and she is forced to run from New York. She sights the killer of her husband, Sukhwinder, and runs for life to Iowa.

In Iowa she happens to meet a kind-hearted woman in Mother Ripplemayer who helps her getting a job in her son Bud’s bank as a teller girl. After a few months Jasmine “is the live-in companion of Bud Ripplemayer.”(Kumar 131) Bud gives her a new name –Jane. Here she meets Du, an adopted son Du who is a Vietnamese brought from a refugee camp by Bud. She immediately identifies herself with Du because they both come from the same “Third World” and share a common legacy of suffering and survival.” She is very happy with Bud carrying his child in her womb but her happiness doesn’t last long when one day Du decides to leave them in search of his family. Du’s departure destabilizes Jane greatly. One day Taylor and Duff come to take her to California and she decides to leave Bud and she accompanies Taylor.

Jasmine, the protagonist of the novel, is a symbol of indomitable human spirit. She resolves to create her own identity. Her evolution and transformation from Jyoti, to Jasmine, to Jase, to Jane is gripping. Born as Jyoti in a small traditional family of Hasnapur, in a terrorism-ridden state of Punjab, she is transformed into Jasmine (a name given to her by her husband), Jase and Jane (when living with a men in Manhattan and Iowa respectively). Through a journey that is marked by widowhood, murder, rape, illegal documents and an uncanny instinct to survive through all the situations, Jasmine believes she is born more than once. Her changing names reflect her rebirths. As an immigrant she feels that she has to try out new identities. For Bharati Mukherjee this change of personality is associated with the death of one’s former self. Jasmine’s journey serves as a metaphor for the ever-moving regeneration process of life itself.

Mukherjee uses the Ramayana and other Indian cultural artifacts in an American context to emphasize a tie between the two countries, and the Indian texts therefore have equal relation to these books. The novel has significant portions of the plot in India and America, with Jasmine

depicting more time in America. When the novel straddles both worlds, it highlights the immigrant woman's ideological liminality. In *Jasmine* the plot follows the titular character in the process of becoming an empowered individual more than it does her process of becoming an American. It is noteworthy that *Jasmine's* process of "becoming" does not have a foreseeable end, even on the last page of the novel. The storylines of the novel is as "tangled" as the identities of its main characters, which complicates any attempt to categorize the characters of the book or the plot into cultural archetypes. Part of the "tangling" results from the narrative, which is often told from the present looking into the past, but not in chronological order. Multiple characters are blended with narrative elements from canonical works and Hindu mythology. Finally, the protagonist in the novel changes her names frequently and in the process embody different incarnations of herself, much like Hindu deities depicted in *The Bhagavad Gita*. In her interviews Mukherjee recognizes that she puts more stock in Indian immigrant women than their male counterparts. She explains women undergo a more "psychological transformation" than men. *Jasmine* is the clearest example of an Indian woman undergoing this psychological transformation.

Mukherjee uses female main character to show the psychological transformation of the New American immigrant and the personal freedom that can be obtained through this process. It is within this outlining of *Jasmine's* psychological transformation that several tropes are employed to metaphorically represent her development into a self-actualized individual. The tropic analysis pairs similar tropes together, though often several of these concepts overlap within the text.

The analysis of the complication of birth/death imagery through *Jasmine's* pregnancy, her rebirths through renaming, and her sage identity maps the ability of the maximalist immigrant to form their identity free from social categorization. Finally, the tropes of psychic violence and technology show the drastic process needed to sever from social categorization to attain personal agency. *Jasmine's* rebirths as *Jyoti/Jasmine/Kali/Jazzy/Jase/Jane* represent stages in *Jasmine's* ever-changing self-identification process and the cultural influence she undertakes at each stage.

Through the journey of *Jasmine* she undergoes transformations which are witnessed through her adaptations of new names i.e *Jyoti/Jasmine/Kali/Jazzy/Jase/Jane*. These new incarnations are the various roles or actions that she plays to face and fight the circumstances are distinct with different incarnations. God also takes births at different period of times. Whenever there is a crisis in the world, God is supposed to incarnate Himself. This is a ringing message of the Fourth Chapter of *The Bhagavadgita*, in verses which are often quoted by spiritual aspirants and religious practitioners. Whenever Adharma dominates the dharma I take birth:

Yadaa Yadaa Hi Dharmasya Glani-r-bhavathy Bharatha
Abhy-ut'thaanam-adharmasya Tada-aathmaanam Sr'jaami-aham (Bhagavad
Gita 4:7)

Lord Krishna tells Arjuna that the purpose of his reincarnation is to save the right and destroy the wrong to establish dharma.

Parithraanaaya Saadhoonaam Vi-naashaaya Cha Dush-kr'thaam
Dharma-samst'thaapna-art'thaaya Sambhavaami Yugae Yugae (Bhagavad
Gita 4:8)

The responsibility of God over the universe is much more than our responsibility in regard to anything. Therefore the reincarnation of God can never be understood in a very simple sense, it has more divine and larger perspective than human beings can even imagine.

There is difference in the incarnations of god and a human being. The different incarnations of god are known to him whereas the incarnations in different births cannot be remembered by a man but various transformations or incarnations in the same birth can be known and remembered as in the case of Jasmine. She gets a new name wherever she goes and whenever she encounters a new challenge. She leaves the old name and the memories attached to it to become a new self, a new born woman with new intentions and realizations.

The Omniscience and Omnipotence of God are of such a nature that we as units inextricably involved in the Being of God will have the occasion to receive His Grace, for God moves in this world in the form of His Incarnations, manifestations, expressions, functions and activities. God is aware of his incarnations but a human being does not know about his :

Na Hi Kaschith-kshanam-api Jaathu Thishttathi-akarma-kr'th
Kaaryathae Hi-avashah Karma Sarvah Prakr'thi-jai-r-gunaihi (Bhagavad Gita
4:5)

There is a great truth behind the working of things, which is more incomprehensible than what is available to our understanding. The manner in which God works in this world is what is known as the Divine Function of the Incarnation. The way in which God descends, as it were, to the levels of the various degrees of the cosmos is the Incarnation of God, whose function is to trace back all particulars to the universal, the Absolute. The Divine Incarnation is the individual symbol of a universal purpose. Divine Incarnations are considered apparently as individuals but really they are universals. The Incarnations are universal beings and they are super-human in their knowledge and power. The distinction between an ordinary individual and a Divine Incarnation is this, that while the individual is confined in its consciousness to the operations of the sense faculties, the mind and the intellect, the Incarnation has an intuitive perception of the inter-relatedness of all things and there is a vision of the Absolute perpetually before the eyes of the Incarnation, notwithstanding the fact that it appears to have descended to the level of the particular individuals.

The other message of the Chapter is that we have to perform, perforce, action as integrated beings in the structure of the universe, basing it on a knowledge of the wholeness of things and our basic relationship with the environment in which we are, so that karma yoga becomes more and more intensive as we rise higher and higher in the level of our comprehension.

When Jasmine visits a swami in an ashram after Prakash's death, he tells her that a person's highest mission is to create new life (Mukherjee 97). She later realizes that the identity of Jasmine and the dream of Vijn and Wife are her versions of this "new life" (Mukherjee 97). It is through this redefinition of "new life" that Jasmine gains enough agency to transform herself into an immigrant. The process of resignification in Jasmine's name changes does not stick because the group categorical identification's inner effects do not retain themselves in Jasmine's view of her identity. Jasmine's selves do not follow the concept of wholeness and often overlap; frustrating the power the signifier has over the signified.

Hindu texts, namely for their focus on reincarnation and pluralistic deities, are the clearest Indian cultural influence on these rebirths. Jasmine, like the Bengali interpretation of

Kali, encompasses birth and destruction at the same time. Her journey also reads as a realization of Hindu theological beliefs about the soul, [Jasmine] presents her view of identity and culture as one that sometimes creatively reworks, but more often merely highlights, the emancipatory narrative of self and identity embedded within the Hindu culture... Jasmine's belief of provisional identity, then, merely reworks one of the basic tenets of Hinduism, which exalts the loss of 'I-ness' as the ultimate aim of all those who subscribe to the Hindu view of human existence. The loss of "I-ness" in Hindu culture prescribes the eventual breakdown of "I" from "not-I", thus giving "cultural sanction to multiple reinscriptions of self that allow the migrant soul to be reborn in other bodies in other cultural spaces. The text's tangled structure allows Jasmine the freedom to float between classic Western feminist female character to powerful Indian goddess Kali. This structure also prescribes the breakdown of cultural barriers in such a way that it nullifies the boundaries between American and Indian classic literature. Here Mukherjee provides not only a space for the Indian immigrant in the American canon, but also subtly makes the argument that Indian women do not adhere to their passive Orientalized stereotype. She uses the pitcher as a visual representation of performative femininity within Hindu culture, namely due to its connection to water gathering (women's work) and the force needed to break it. Mukherjee enables Jasmine to be seen as feminist in ways that defy both historical conceptions of women by breaking the "pitcher" that divides American and Indian feminine roles represented in these characters. Through interwoven identities of fictional women that gain agency through their ability to transform themselves, Mukherjee sets a literary precedent for Jasmine and therefore asserts her place as an American feminist character.

A Hindu interpretation of the soul provides a map for how the Hindu self-concept as a breakable pitcher gets translated into the American trope of the pioneer. As pioneers within American culture were seen to violently break with their past to explore new territories, the "self made man" trope of identity that encompasses the mythical pioneer experience becomes Jasmine's new totem. This trope emerges as early as Jasmine's youth in Hasnapur where she views "Seven Brides for Seven Brothers" and "Shane." Both films present an idealized depiction of the American west filled with rugged outlaws and lumberjacks stealing startlingly complicit women for their wives. Jasmine states that this version of America does not translate for her, but this early introduction of western mythology serves as a benchmark for her transformation.

Mukherjee's trademark style is reflected in all her novels. Where she juxtaposes texts, people, and environments that are seemingly polarized due to class, race, traditions, religions or national identity in way that calls into question their differences. Hindu multiplicity and American inventiveness no longer solely belong to the traditions of either East or West, further calling into question the argued necessity for assimilation of marginalized groups. *Jasmine* especially marks the transition in her writing from exploring an individual Indian immigrant's struggle to adapt to an often resistant culture to exploring how a immigrant can work as a transformative agent in ways not available to those who cannot look beyond their own social categories. Jasmine is a character who truly reflects the meaning of reincarnating herself to adapt, face and fight the time to achieve the desirable.

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